

Left Behind by peachykeen-jb

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Language: English

Characters: J. Hopper, Joyce B.

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-07-11 10:11:44

Updated: 2019-07-14 20:41:32

Packaged: 2019-12-12 18:57:37

Rating: M

Chapters: 2

Words: 10,543

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Jim Hopper can't take it anymore and Joyce is just plain confused until suddenly she isn't. AKA: What if Joyce and Hopper took Murray up on his suggestion to "pull over, tear off those clothes and get it over with already"?

1. Chapter 1

"Alright, get out."

The words were said with such astute authority that Joyce felt goosebumps rise on her skin. After being on the receiving end of the most bold, embarrassing, and cringe worthy tirade she'd ever heard outside of a cheesy movie, she and Hopper had been stewing quietly. Not 10 minutes later, the car suddenly veered into a McDonald's rest stop on the side of highway 64. Hopper was currently glaring at the two men in the backseat, his face completely serious. Murray was unable to hide his shock as he stared up at Hopper with wide eyes and arched brows.

"Wait, you're not actually serious."

"Get. Out."

Murray quickly muttered something in Russian to Alexei, and before Joyce could wrap her head around what was happening, the two men were exiting the car and wandering toward the empty restaurant. Her heart rate sped up as she finally looked over at Hopper. He was staring at her with eyes holding a lot more emotion than just the bitterness he'd been aiming at her since yesterday. She knew he was stressed out trying to grapple with his teenage daughter's first relationship, particularly in the past month since Mike Wheeler was free on summer vacation and spending all his time at the cabin instead of school. The anger was usually directed at the boy, but all of a sudden it felt like he was mad at *her*. He'd been particularly manic the past few days, fluctuating between yelling and sullen moodiness. Now he was eerily quiet and looking at her like he wanted to say a million things and nothing at all. He started with a sigh,

"Joyce, I'm sorry."

That was unexpected.

"You're sorry?"

"I've been acting like an ass, I know," he said, rubbing the back of his neck and glancing away for a second, "I didn't expect to be spending so much time with you after you skipped out on me. I thought I'd ice you out for a few days, cool myself off, and then walk back into Melvalds like nothing happened. You and your magnets blew that plan out of the water."

"Skipped out on you? What are you-" she stopped herself before finishing the question.

Oh.

The dinner.

He was hurt. It didn't occur to her before, but Joyce suddenly realized that her skipping their "friendly" dinner meant a lot more to him than it did to her. It never even crossed her mind because come on, Jim Hopper didn't wait around for women. She assumed he brushed it off like it was nothing. But it hardly seemed like the time to discuss it. Not when they're currently sitting in a stolen vehicle on the edge of an eastern Illinois McDonald's parking lot.

"So you suddenly decided to pull over on the side of the highway to apologize? Couldn't that have waited until we got home? Our kids-"

"I know!" he cut in, running a hand through his hair, "but I've got to say something or I'm gonna explode, and then we'll never get back to Hawkins."

He still had that deadly serious look on his face, so she threw her hands in the air and gave him an exasperated sigh.

"Fine! What do you want to say?"

"He was right. Everything that quack conspiracy theorist said about me is right, and I gotta tell you Joyce, it's been really hard to not just jump you every time you went off in someone's face these past couple days. It's hot as hell."

Joyce's mouth fell open. She stared at him with wide eyes but he pushed forward.

"I've fought it for... so long," he grit out, balling his hands into fists against the steering wheel, "and with all this shit happening again, I don't want to wait anymore."

The last thing Joyce expected was a confession of feelings. Sure, maybe they were just sexual feelings, but she was shocked he was admitting to them. She wasn't an idiot, she was aware of her own behavior and how it had been toeing the line between friendly and flirting for the past month or so. She thought it was part of the game though. He'd ask her for advice, they'd throw a couple well meaning jabs at each other, he'd touch her arm or she'd graze his hand. But she thought they had an understanding. There was just too much trauma between them to ever push anything further. The look he was giving her now seemed to suggest otherwise.

"Tell me you feel it too Joyce, just say it. I can't be alone in this."

He looked wrecked, staring at her with eyes filled with equal parts fear and desire. She wanted to question him, to ask him how long he felt this way, but those wild blue eyes were distracting her and she could feel the familiar tingle of desire in her belly. She'd deal with the feelings later. If they had to talk about all the things they really felt towards each other, all the trauma and repressed urges, they'd never get down to it. And right now, with his mussed hair and desperate expression, she realized that all she wanted was to feel him.

"Shut up and kiss me."

Hopper didn't need to be told twice. He immediately reached forward and cupped the sides of her face, pulling her close and finally joining their lips.

It felt like coming home. His lips were soft and she brought her hands up to his shoulders to give her small frame better leverage. They hadn't kissed this way since they were 14 years old, before she decided that she liked older boys with gelled hair and pocket knives and he decided that screwing his way through the cheerleading squad was a better use of his time than pining for her. His mustache scraped the sensitive skin around her mouth but at least they didn't have to deal with braces this time.

Soon enough the kiss turned desperate. Joyce moaned into his mouth as he bit her lip and his hands slipped down to caress her sides. He moved away from her lips and trailed open mouthed kisses along her jaw, and then her neck. She gasped as he found the sensitive spot below her ear, and she couldn't help the way she squirmed in her seat, desperate for more friction.

Murray wasn't just right about Hopper. She didn't confess it to him, but the man was right about her too. Of course she imagined what it'd be like to be with Jim. Her logical brain usually won out (he had his own issues and she had so much baggage he probably wouldn't want her anyway), but sometimes she couldn't stop herself from picturing what it would be like if they just gave in. He was a mess, but God he was big and strong and her mind conjured images of him taking her against a wall. Every time he used his fists she felt a treasonous ache rise in her body. Her insides twisted with want, when logically she knew she shouldn't be so turned on by the image of him wailing on someone. She always did have bad taste in men. Bob was the exception, not the rule, and her other relationships were always driven by pure desire for someone to just take control, regardless of how they treated her.

His hand on her breast pulled her back to the present. She helped him out by yanking her shirt over her head and tossing it aside. He returned to her lips and she could feel his grin as he easily popped the clasp on her bra and used one large hand to massage her breast, the other tangling in her hair. It was hot and desperate, and Joyce couldn't contain the moan that escaped as he tweaked her nipple.

Things became a blur from there. He pulled away for a moment to pull the lever on his seat, pushing it back as far as it would go. Joyce didn't hesitate as she climbed over the center console to sit in his lap, immediately crushing their lips together again. She fumbled with his belt as he slipped her jeans down. He slid one finger inside her, then another, working her open gently but efficiently. They never made it this far when they were kids, and the thought of experiencing something new with him sent a thrill up her spine.

"God Joyce, if we had more time, the things I would do to you..." he rasped, pulling back to look at her for a moment with lust darkened eyes.

She shushed him and went back to capture his mouth. She slipped a hand down to free him from his boxer briefs, giving him a quick tug that sent his eyes rolling back in his head. Before she could guide him in, he reached a hand down between them,

"No condom" he ground out. She shook her head and pushed her hips down on him, eliciting a deep groan.

"Don't care," she murmured.

That was all it took. He slipped inside, giving her a minute to adjust, and then they were moving in tandem. She put her hands on his chest, giving her leverage to twist as she moved up and down. He gripped her hips tightly and Joyce knew she'd have bruises later but she didn't care. Their breathing picked up in time with his thrusts, and soon Joyce could feel the pressure building deep inside her. He slipped a hand down and pressed her clit, and after a few more thrusts she was undone. Her orgasm hit her and she cried out as she clenched around him. She could tell he was close too as his thrusts became more erratic. Still reveling in the aftershocks, she leaned down and whispered in his ear, "cum for me, Chief", and like a magic word he obeyed. He grunted as he spilled himself inside her, pulling her close and then collapsing back against the seat.

They lay still for a moment, letting their breathing return to normal. She reached up and brushed some stray hairs off his sweaty forehead before turning and resting her head against his shoulder. He buried his face in her hair and sighed. He mumbled something that could have been "I fucking love you", but she was too blissed out and tired to tell.

Joyce was adjusting her shirt and trying not to smile as Hopper stared at her with something akin to awe. The windows were down and a slight breeze blew through the car, but her goosebumps weren't due to the cool night wind. She turned to look at him and quirked one brow,

"What?"

"You're more than a quick fuck, you know that right? After all this is over-"

"Charming as ever" Joyce cut in, "But I know. We'll talk later. They're coming back."

She jerked her head toward the direction of the McDonald's, alerting him to Murray and Alexei who were currently crossing the parking lot. The Russian seemed to be holding another large beverage of some sort.

He glanced out the window for a moment, before turning back and quickly giving her a kiss on the lips.

"We'll talk after we find our kids."

Joyce shook her head slightly and sat back in her seat. Everything about him was a paradox. He was one of the most mercurial people she had ever met. The Hopper she knew was supportive and attentive, but he also had a temper that he struggled to control. But even when they bickered, she never felt an ounce of fear. She knew he would never be like Lonnie, but she was wary of the uncharted territory. Whenever she was with him she felt a confusing vortex of safe yet out of control, if that was even possible. She trusted him implicitly yet she feared he could leave her at any moment. Joyce didn't know if she was ready to let him into her life in such a way yet.

The backdoor of the car opened and Joyce was pulled from her brooding as the two men slipped back into their seats. Hopper was casually smoking a cigarette she hadn't noticed he'd lit.

"So, I assume you two worked things out like adults?" Murray asked, a smug grin spreading across his features. Alexei was looking between the two of them with interest, noisily slurping the last of what she guessed was a milkshake.

Joyce just shook her head and Hopper muttered "shut up, Murray" before pulling out of the parking lot and getting them back on the road to Hawkins.

He left her.

The thing she feared the most was her reality now. As soon as she

even considered opening her heart again, he was gone.

Joyce replayed the scenario over and over again. If she'd tossed the gun so that he actually caught it, he'd still be here. If If he hadn't thrown the Russian into the generator, he'd still be here. If they hadn't agreed to a real date on Friday, he'd still be here. Joyce was almost sure of that. She was so cursed that even a glimmer of hope about the start of something new was enough to convince fate to rip it away.

His final smile was burned in her brain. She was worried that her hands would never stop shaking. The hands that had turned the key that sealed his fate. Hands that only a few hours before had run up and down his chest and touched him more intimately than she ever imagined outside her personal fantasies. Before they finally had sex, she thought never knowing the taste was the worst hell. It turns out knowing it and then taking it away was even more unbearable. For the rest of her life she was going to be left with questions. What-if scenarios of how their lives could have gone if he had made it out of that damn Russian bunker.

It wasn't fair, but this was her life.

She could break down in private, but now it was time to be strong for the kids. For her sons, who'd seen even more horror than she ever dreamed possible. And for El, who was lost without the one adult who took care of her and loved her like his own. Joyce would deal with her own personal consequences later. All that mattered was them.

2. Chapter 2

Joyce was sick.

She pushed it off for a while. Tried to excuse it because the past four months had been so difficult. She spent all her time trying to pick up the pieces of her traumatized sons and now her daughter. Then there was the move: a couple months spent preparing, then packing and unpacking in a frenzy to get her family settled and adjusted to a new normal.

The first month after he was gone, she felt numb. After helping Flo arrange the funeral, she threw herself into caring for her children and working to save up for the move. She tried not to think about him during the day, but he haunted her dreams every night. She woke from nightmares with tears streaming down her face, just like she had after Bob. But this time, there was no one to call at 3 am. It was a habit the two of them had fallen into last winter. When she woke in the middle of the night, heart pounding, she'd tiptoe to the kitchen and call the number she'd memorized out of necessity. "Hop", she'd whisper, and he'd answer with "I'm here", and sit quietly while she either explained what she'd seen in her dream or just cried silently. Now she lay awake at night and stared at the ceiling, using the dawn hours to steel herself and make sure she was ready to face the kids with a comforting smile at breakfast.

The second month was worse. She had more trouble concealing her feelings. She found herself crying in the storeroom at Melvads when a tall man in aviators entered the store and asked where the chip aisle was. The hot August days were taking their toll and she felt irritable, tired, and just plain *sad* all the time. Her stomach would twist in knots whenever she drove by the police station in the morning, reminding her again and again that she'd never see his truck parked outside, the thought of which made her want to vomit. Most of the time it didn't end up being just a thought. She increasingly found herself running to the bathroom as soon as she got into the store, throwing up whatever small amount of food she'd eaten at breakfast.

It wasn't fair. Everyone else was starting to move on, while her family was still drowning in grief. El was not fully comfortable at home yet

and still very quiet, Jonathan was angry at her about the move and was just starting to come around, and Will was still so on-edge that even the slightest sound made him jump. So Joyce fought the despair, the anger and the nausea as much as she could, even though it was starting to feel like a losing battle.

By the time September crept up, she was more exhausted than ever. The house finally sold and it was time to start packing. As they boxed up everything they owned, with help from the Party, Joyce found herself sneaking away and lying on her bed in her ever-emptying room to catch a quick nap. Sometimes one of the kids would catch her and she always brushed off their worried looks with a tight smile, pushing her exhausted body up from the bed and rejoining the packing brigade.

She let herself cry openly on the day of the move. How could she not when she watched those kids hug each other goodbye? They had been through so much together. She second guessed herself for the hundredth time, but she knew it was the right choice. Will and El deserved to finish their teenage years somewhere safe and normal. She had to give that to them, even if they were angry about it now. Joyce had her own selfish reasons as well, if she was being honest. Her nerves couldn't take another year of worrying about the gate reopening somehow. And she couldn't stand being in this town any longer when everything about it reminded her of *him* and everything they went through. So the Byers left Hawkins and she could only hope that they were leaving behind their demons as well.

Now that the family had been settled in their new home for a month, it was time to admit that maybe her symptoms were due to more than grief. The nausea was in full force as she drove herself to the walk-in clinic in their new town. Horrible thoughts swirled in her head, not for own her fate but for the kids'. She lost her own mother to cancer at age 11, and with no help from her drunken father, she'd essentially raised herself. What would they do if something ended up being really wrong with her? She couldn't leave them now. That wasn't an option. She had to be fine.

So here she was, waiting on a hospital exam table, her anxiety causing her hands to shake so badly that she has to sit on them.

Joyce kicked herself for all the years she skipped out on doctor's appointments, choosing to save the money for emergency visits for her kids should they ever need it. She was still wrapped in her thoughts when there was a knock on the door. A tall woman with a tight perm and sympathetic eyes entered.

"Hello Ms. Byers, I'm Dr. Schneider, nice to meet you. How are you doing today?"

"Hi," Joyce greeted, wiping her sweaty palm on her jeans before shaking the doctor's hand, "And I've been better, thanks."

"The nurse tells me that you're here because you've been having symptoms of nausea and extreme tiredness?"

"I've been exhausted, yeah. The nurse took my blood work because she thought it could be Lyme disease?"

"We'll get to that," Dr. Schneider responded, not unkindly, "Any other symptoms?"

"I've been irritable, but I'm trying to hide it from my kids and just take it out on customers. I started at the Kmart down the street a couple weeks ago." Joyce tried to joke, her voice sounding flat even to her own ears "But I've had a lot of life changes recently, and it's been difficult."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Dr. Schneider slipped on a pair of gloves and unwrapped the stethoscope from around her neck, "I'm just going to check a few things myself. Could you take some deep breaths for me?"

Joyce did as she was told but as she sucked in her first breath, her mind took her elsewhere. "Come on Joyce, deep breaths for me. In and out. In and out." Jim was always good at talking her down from an impending anxiety attack. When she had nightmares of Will vanishing again or Bob being torn to shreds, he talked her down. Whenever she felt anxious these days, it was his voice that echoed in her head. He always reminded her to breathe. When they first ventured into *that place* to rescue her son, his calm voice repeating "In and out" grounded her. Hearing his voice now felt like the most

bittersweet balm. He soothed her nerves but it didn't stop her chest from tightening whenever she remembered him.

"Could you lean back for me?"

The doctor's voice pulled Joyce from her memories and she followed her direction. As she settled herself back against the scratchy sanity paper, Dr. Schneider lifted Joyce's shirt halfway up and carefully began applying pressure. She moved her hands around carefully, pressing gently in various locations around Joyce's abdomen. Joyce tried to muffle a grunt of pain as the doctor's ministrations went lower. She'd been feeling bloated lately but she attributed that to the nausea and the bad diet she and the kids had been eating as they packed and unpacked their kitchen. Suddenly the doctor made a small noise of affirmation and pulled away. She slipped her gloves off and looked at Joyce carefully.

"Ms. Byers, according to your bloodwork and what I've just felt with my examination, you're pregnant."

No.

Joyce's vision tunneled. Not true. It couldn't be true. Static roared in her ears as she watched Dr. Schneider's mouth move, but couldn't make out the sound. A sudden hand on her shoulder grounded her and she refocused on the young doctor's face.

"Joyce, did you hear what I said?"

"That's... not possible,"

"Are you sure? Think about it carefully."

"I mean," she sucked in a breath and tried to steady her shaking voice, "maybe it's possible. But a single night months ago? And I'm 41, I don't understand how it could have happened."

"Well, all it takes is just the once. No matter what the circumstances are."

Joyce shook her head, "I just... I can't be pregnant right now, you don't understand."

The doctor paused, looking at her carefully.

"Are you afraid of someone? If you're worried that the baby's father will harm you or the fetus, you can tell me. We have resources-

"No, it's not that, it's..." unable to continue, she raised a hand in the air and shook her head. How could she possibly begin to explain that the father was dead, and that it was her fault? She blinked away her tears, not wanting to give the doctor more reason to suspect something.

"I can give you a minute then, if you'd like me to step out," Dr. Schneider said, motioning toward the door. Joyce shook her head and quickly wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

"No, I'm fine. Tell me where we go from here. It's been... a while since my last pregnancy."

"Well I'd like to do an ultrasound to confirm, but I believe you're about 16 weeks or just about four months. At this point you should definitely be thinking about lifestyle changes, and I'll write down the name of some prenatal vitamins I'd like you to start taking."

Joyce was angry.

No she was furious. She was beside herself with rage. She was so goddamn mad at herself for being so stupid, she was angry at him for being so stupid, and she was furious that he wasn't here for her to yell at.

This was her life. Joyce Byers, the single mother. Both of her other pregnancies had technically been accidents as well. Lonnie was around in the beginning but as soon as they both could walk, he was out of there again. She loved her sons but raising them without a partner was hard on them and her. But she naively thought she was out of the woods; her time as a mother to a couple of kids had shifted into a mother of teenagers and soon a mother of adult children. Now here was a new child who would never have a father. She was all alone in this, again.

Her car flew past the road that led to her new house and she continued driving. Soon she was driving along the lake on the edge of town. It was almost the end of October and the likelihood of anyone being at the town beach was low. At the first opportunity she turned down one of the tree-lined roads that led to the lakefront. The pinto peeled into a dirt parking space and she jumped out, slamming the door behind her. The lake stood before her, serene and blue.

"FUCK!" she screamed at the empty lake. Her voice echoed over the water, the clear October sky reflecting back on the surface, calm and peaceful in the face of her emotional turmoil. Her chest was heaving and suddenly she couldn't hold back anymore. The tears, once they were allowed out, streamed down her face and she sank to her knees. It wasn't fair.

He wasn't here. He revealed himself that night in the car, telling her how much he wanted her and maybe (she still wasn't sure) admitting that he loved her. Then he had to be a goddamn hero and save them all. Now here she was, knocked up and alone. It was like a teenage cliché except they were both in their forties. And he was dead. He wasn't coming back and he was never going to know.

Her traitorous brain conjured up his face, bloodied and covered in sweat, staring up at her as they both realized that he wasn't going to make it back through. The last thing he ever did was smile at her. Then she turned those keys and he was gone, and even though she knew there were many factors that led them to that exact moment, she still blames herself. It keeps her up at night, replaying over and over the sound of the explosion, the empty space where he stood, and El's distraught face when she realized her dad wasn't coming home. Now she has to live with herself. Maybe this was her punishment for robbing him of the chance to continue raising his telekinetic daughter. He deserved to be a father, to El and to this new baby.

Baby. Without consciously thinking, her hand fell to her stomach. There was a very slight swell to it already. How could she not have noticed it? How did she ignore the signs *for months*? Maybe some part of her conscious did know, but she hadn't wanted to admit it. She hadn't wanted to even entertain the possibility. Now she was forced to reckon with the facts. She had no choice but to accept that this was really happening. She had to make a decision.

Joyce looked out over the lake, fighting to control her anxiety and think logically.

"Come on Joyce, in and out"

She breathed and the cold air soothed her burning insides.

An abortion wasn't an option. Well it was, and it was her initial gut response to the situation, but almost immediately she realized she couldn't. This baby was wanted. Not by her, not yet, but she knew in her heart that Jim would have been all in. She can't allow herself to picture it completely yet, but in another timeline he was still here and they were figuring this batshit crazy scenario out together. He would tell her that it was her decision but his eyes would betray him and she'd know immediately that he wanted this. She'd say it was happening too fast, and he would calm her down and promise that he would be her partner in this. She knew he'd be scared, after Sarah, and after everything they'd gone through together with their kids, but he would assure her that they couldn't pass up this chance, a chance he hadn't considered but now couldn't imagine losing.

She rubbed her hand back and forth over the small but defined bump. A part of him and a part of her. An unexpected result of one rushed night in the back of a stolen convertible. It's not how she would have wanted things, but now that he was gone, how could she possibly give up even a small part of him? This was something they created together. Something they would forever share. Joyce wanted to be practical- she was too old, too poor, too stressed for another baby- but her heart was winning.

"What am I supposed to do, Hop?" she said aloud.

The only answer was the sound of the wind whistling across the lake.

She somehow let a month go by, fretting and worrying to herself about this little secret while putting on a good face for the kids. As soon as she got back in the car that day at the lake she knew for sure that she was keeping it, but Joyce worried about her children's reaction to the news. This was another major change to their lives after two years of seismic shifts. But she couldn't hide it forever. Her

secret was literally growing. It felt like her waistline was getting bigger by the day, as if once she was made aware of its presence, the baby decided it was the perfect time for a growth spurt. Halloween had passed and if they noticed the extra weight in her normally thin face, she hoped they attributed it to the extra candy she'd been sneaking out of Will and El's trick or treat buckets. She wasn't going to be able to hide it much longer, even with the baggy wardrobe that she preferred.

It was time to break the news.

She waited until after dinner, letting the kids talk about their days and joke about their new teachers. Jonathan was at community college for now, living at home and hoping to transfer later on. She was secretly thankful for that, knowing that Will and El were comforted by his presence. They were laughing at something El said, the sound finally becoming a more normal occurrence in the house. Joyce's heart raced as she cleared the table. The baby wasn't kicking yet but at 5 months along she was feeling little flutters as it shifted inside her. Those movements reminded her that this was real, that she had to face this. She could feel it moving now as her nerves spiked.

"Hey guys," she said, sitting back down, "I have to talk to you about something."

Three sets of eyes turned to look at her, concern immediately replacing the joy.

"Mom, are you okay?" Jonathon asked at the same time that Will said, "Are we moving again?"

"No, sweetie, we're not moving."

Joyce couldn't look at them. It was easy to say it without seeing their immediate reactions. She found a spot on the table in front of the three of them and sucked in a deep breath,

"I'm pregnant."

She paused for a second, just long enough to hear El's quiet gasp

before continuing, "I've known for a while, and I'm sorry for not telling you, but I didn't want you guys to worry. You've all been dealing with so much, and I want you to know that this doesn't change anything. Jonathon, you're going to continue going to school, and Will you're going to continue with Art Club and not get a job, don't think I haven't heard you talking about it. I can manage, I always have. We're going to be fine. We've made it through so much and we'll continue to do so. I just ask that you continue to trust me when I say that things will be okay."

She trailed off, finally daring to look up from the table.

They were all deathly quiet. Will, her sweet emotional boy, was wide eyed and staring back at her with a concerned, confused and slightly grossed out expression. Jonathan had his eyes squeezed shut, his hands running through his hair in a move that she recognized as "agitated". Then there was El, who was currently frozen and staring at the table hard enough that Joyce would have been worried if the girl still had her powers.

"It's his, isn't it?" Jonathan asked. He wasn't accusing, but his expression told her it was more of a statement than a question. He knew.

"Whose?" Will asked, looking between his brother and mother for confirmation.

"The Chiefs." He answered quietly, his eyes never leaving Joyce's face.

She nodded slowly, unable to stop the tears from swelling in her eyes.

"I didn't know you were together," Will said quietly.

"We weren't, baby, it was complicated. Sometimes things happen between adults and-"

"Mom!" Jonathan cut in, throwing his hands up, "We get it, we can all guess what happened, we don't need to hear you say it."

"I'm sorry, I-"

"It's okay Mom," Will jumped in, "But why didn't you tell us before? We can help you more, we're not little kids."

Jonathan was nodding along, and she knew they would support her no matter what. Joyce reached out and grabbed both her sons' hands.

"I know, and I appreciate that. But you have to remember that you're still a kid too. This isn't your responsibility. I've been a mom before and I'll be able to do it again."

Suddenly El's chair toppled over backward as the girl stood and fled the room. They heard the door to her room slam, and Joyce winced. Jonathan was about to open his mouth when she cut him off,

"This is different for her than it is for you two. You have to remember what she's going through right now. I'm going to talk to her."

Joyce made her way down the hall to El's room. The door was covered in cutouts from Seventeen magazine, and she knocked on the door beside an image of Michael J. Fox.

"El? Can I come in? I want to talk, just you and me."

She waited for the muffled yes, and then entered quietly. El was lying face down on her bed, her face buried in her pillow. Joyce approached the bed and sat down at the foot of it. She suddenly remembered the day Hop had approached her in the store, practically begging for advice about how to break up El and Mike, and she told him he had to have a heart to heart with his daughter. It was difficult for him to express his feelings and actually talk about things. But it was all part of being a parent, and he showed a willingness to try. She hated that she had to have this particular conversation in his place. He and El deserved to talk about this major life change together.

"Sweetie, I'm sorry you're upset. I know this is a big change. But I want you to know that I love you, and Jonathan and Will still love you, and you are just as much a part of this family as the rest of us. Your Dad loved you too, and this wouldn't have changed that. In fact, it probably would have brought all of us closer."

El was quiet for a moment before she slowly sat up and moved closer to Joyce on the bed.

"I know," she said quietly, "He loved me. But that's why it hurts. And now the new baby is going to feel that hurt too. Because he can't be here anymore. For me or the baby."

"Oh El," Joyce said, the tears returning to her eyes, "I miss him too. But Hop did what he did to protect you, to protect all of us, and I think he'd do it again if it meant that you stayed safe. His sacrifice meant that we can move on and live a good life. That's all he wanted: for you to have a good life."

"I just want him to be here."

"I know," Joyce replied, placing a light kiss on the girl's head, "I want that too."

They were quiet for a few moments before Joyce felt El shift, pulling back a little to look at her directly.

"Did you love him?"

Ah. She should have expected that. The girl still looked at things in black and white.

"It's complicated, sweetie" Joyce sighed. But El continued staring at her with wide, watery eyes so she tried to continue, "He meant a lot to me, you know that. We were friends for a long time and there was a lot of history there. But I think I did love him, in a way."

"I think he was in love with you."

El whispered it so quietly that Joyce thought she may have misheard.

"He was always happy after seeing you," she continued, "Even when you'd argue. He still wanted to be around you."

Joyce smiled tightly, at a loss of what to say. El had spent more time alone with Hopper than anyone, but she was still so young. She couldn't know for sure how he really felt. She was about to answer when she felt another quickening in her abdomen. Her hand dropped

to it automatically. El watched her closely.

"Is that the baby?"

"Yes, I can feel them moving around. Jonathon's chili must have woken them up."

"Can I feel?"

"Well there's not really much for you to feel yet. The baby's still small enough that you probably can't feel him from the outside."

"Him?" El asked quickly, picking up on the word.

"Or her. Not sure yet, and I think I'll leave it as a surprise."

El was still staring intently at her stomach, so Joyce reached out and took her hand, gently laying it on the top of her now distended abdomen. Although it was hidden underneath her baggy shirts, the bump was becoming very well defined.

"See? At some point, he or she will be strong enough that you'll be able to feel them kick your hand. But not yet. I promise I'll let you know."

"What does it feel like?"

"It's sort of a rumble feeling-"

"Like when I drink too much soda?"

"Not really," Joyce laughed, "It's lighter, more like... like butterfly wings fluttering around."

El nodded, her eyes still glued to where her hand rested, clearly fascinated. It was then that Joyce decided to involve El more for the rest of the pregnancy. She needed to feel connected to this family, and this was a way for them to bond. She and the baby were going to share a dad, and even if he wasn't with them anymore, Joyce felt determined to foster that connection for him.

"You know, this baby's really going to need you. You're more like

Hopper than anyone, and I think he'd want you to keep an extra close eye on him or her. They're going to need a big sister to protect them."

"And teach them how to make Eggos," El said with a grin, her unique humor finally returning.

Joyce smiled, "Yes, I promise that when they're old enough, you can make them their first Eggo".

Christmas snuck up on the family, and Joyce did her best to get them through the holiday season with a sense of normalcy. There were presents under the tree and a Christmas ham that she (thankfully) didn't burn. Everyone was smiling as they surprised each other with small gifts. She was setting more and more of her paycheck aside for the baby, but she still managed to pick out one special item for each of her kids. The boys and El surprised her with more than she could have asked for, for both her and the new baby. El was especially proud of the clothes she'd chosen. "Max said that green is the best color if you don't know whether it's a boy or girl," she said softly as she handed Joyce the box.

Christmas day was fun but the three kids were more excited for December 26th. Jonathan was driving them back to Hawkins for the rest of the week. Although they asked her, Joyce had chosen not to go. There wasn't anyone she wanted to see, and if she was being honest, she didn't want to face the town in her condition.

It wasn't a secret (Will and El had both told Mike almost immediately, and El told Max, who must have told Lucas, and they both told Dustin, which meant the whole town probably knew at this point), but she'd finally had enough of being the talk of that damn town. Her bump had grown considerably, and she felt more comfortable staying home and lying low for the next few days.

"Alright, promise me you'll drive safe, and if the snow gets too bad, please pull over. And call me when you get to the Wheelers!" she said, giving a hug to each of her kids on the way out the door. When it was El's turn, she hugged her surrogate mom tightly and then bent down and placed both her hands on the sides of Joyce's stomach.

"Be good and let Joyce sleep," El said, "We love you."

True to her word, Joyce pulled El aside on the night when she first felt the baby kick strongly against the inside of her abdomen. The girl was fascinated, staring at her stomach in wonder and moving her slender hand around to feel more movement. Ever since that night, El always greeted Joyce and the baby separately. Joyce indulged her, knowing that the girl felt a special connection with the baby through their shared dad. It helped both of them not feel so alone.

Jonathan honked the horn and El pulled away with a smile. Joyce gave a final wave as she ran out the door, watching as El hopped in the back and the car pulled out of the driveway.

That night, she lay in bed tossing and turning, unable to get comfortable enough to sleep. She didn't mind the quiet. It was actually nice to be home alone and have some time to herself, but she was currently dealing with a major problem. The hormones. She was nearing the end of her second trimester and for several weeks now she'd been dealing with the most embarrassing need of her life. She was horny and frustrated, and nothing she did seemed to relieve it.

Joyce groaned and pulled the pillow from between her legs that she was using to relieve her lower back pain. She shifted so she was flat on her back and she tossed one arm over her head in frustration. She snaked the other hand down, having to stretch around her large stomach, and gently started to rub her clit. She squeezed eyes shut and tried to pretend that her own fingers were satisfying enough.

Suddenly he was there with her.

"Damn Joyce, you're so beautiful."

"Oh please, I look like a whale. An old whale."

"Nah, I like you like this. You finally have some meat on your bones."

"You're one to talk," she replied, poking him in the belly. He was hovering over her, gently running one hand up and down from her hip to her collarbone, eliciting goosebumps along the way.

"Hey! I'm trying to give you a compliment, woman."

"This is all your fault you know. If you just kept a condom in your wallet like a normal horned-up man, this wouldn't have happened."

"I believe *someone* was eager enough to not care if a condom was involved or not."

"I was on the pill! I just missed a few days when we were trekking to Illinois and back, I didn't think it was such a big deal at my age!"

"I guess I just couldn't be stopped."

"Oh gross," she said, rolling her eyes, "Don't you dare gloat. You don't have to do any of the hard work."

He responded sliding his hand between them and palming her most sensitive areas. She moaned and moved her body against his hand, begging for more friction. He let her ride his right hand while the left brushed the side of her belly. He rubbed a thumb back and forth, right over the spot where Joyce had recently felt an elbow jab her from the inside.

"I really do mean it," he continued softly, "You're carrying our baby, how could you not look beautiful to me?"

She sighed in response, trying to get lost in the feeling of his hands on her.

"Just touch me, please."

Hopper's fingers slipped inside her, two and then three. His thumb circled her clit as his other hand slid up her body to massage her breast. His lips ghosted over her neck and collarbone, settling on a place just below her ear that sent shockwaves through her body. She ground her hips against his hand in an effort to get him to move faster. He picked up the pace but his other hand left her breast and tenderly brushed the stray hair from her forehead. His eyes met hers as he hovered above her and...

"Fuck," she cried as she came around her hand. The relief was short lived as she felt the tears leaking from her eyes.

Joyce brushed them away with the palms of her hands and stared up

at the ceiling. She was barely satisfied and now she was left with a deeper longing. What she wouldn't give to just have him here to hold her at night, even if all they did was sleep. They never made it that far in their relationship. She groaned and heaved her body out of bed. Sleep wouldn't be coming any time soon. She might as well have a snack.

By Joyce's eighth month, she was supremely uncomfortable. She had never been one of those women who loved pregnancy or felt beautiful during the process. She had swollen ankles, swollen breasts, and a supremely swollen stomach. Bending over was no longer an option and she was winded just walking down the aisle of the store where she worked. It was the end of February and there was snow on the ground but she still felt hot and sweaty at all moments of the day.

She kept thinking that it wasn't possible for the baby to grow anymore, but each day the little bugger proved her wrong. Somehow it felt like he or she was able to sit on her bladder and hit her lungs at the same time. She didn't remember being this uncomfortable during her first two pregnancies. Maybe it was her age or the fact that this was her third go around. Or maybe it was genetics. Jim was a big man and apparently this baby got all his best traits. She should've known their genes weren't going to match well. Each day when she woke up and felt like her stomach had grown another inch, she got a little more nervous about how exactly this baby would be getting out of her small frame.

But as much as she liked to complain, she also couldn't hide her smile when she felt the baby kick against her hand. She found herself talking to her stomach more and more, becoming acclimated to the idea of a permanent new addition to their family. Will and El only had a couple more years left of high school, which meant it will just be Joyce and the little bugger at home for the majority of his or her childhood. She was okay with that. This baby was going to grow up loved, and that was all that mattered. They were going to have a nice, quiet life.

The kids were out and she was currently washing dishes in the kitchen when the telephone rang. Joyce quickly dried her hands and waddled to the phone,

"Hello?"

"Joyce? It's Sam Owens."

Joyce's chest tightened at the name and a feeling of dread tingled down her spine. She couldn't help but associate him with that horrible place and Will's possession. She knew he meant well, but it was hard for her to trust people these days. The last time she'd spoken to Dr. Owens was a week after Hopper's funeral. He said that his department was opening an investigation into the Starcourt fiasco. He said he wanted to make sure that something like this could never happen under their noses again. He also mentioned wanting to get justice for Hop. Joyce had only nodded and thanked him for his support. It wouldn't change anything anyway. But she hadn't heard from him since.

"Hi Sam, what can I do for you?"

"They've officially closed the investigation. And they didn't find anything. Not a single name that we could prosecute. I wanted you to hear it from me. I'm so sorry."

Joyce wasn't surprised. She hadn't put much hope into the investigation leading anywhere. Besides, she'd been preoccupied with bigger things in the past few months.

"Oh. Thanks for letting me know. I'm sure you guys were thorough."

"Yeah, we had our top men on it, since it was Russia and all, but nothing turned up," he paused a moment, but then pushed on in a softer voice, "I think a part of me was doing it for Jim. If we had gotten there sooner, maybe things could have been different. I regret that, I really do."

Joyce didn't say anything this time. Of course a part of her blamed Owens and the army for not getting there in time. Just like she blamed the Russians, and Murray, and that girl from Utah, and herself for turning the goddamn keys. But she was doing her best to move forward now. She didn't want lingering resentment over things she couldn't change. A strong kick from the baby brought her out of her thoughts, and she rubbed a hand over the top of her stomach.

Sam was still talking on the other end,

"I miss having another man who knew what was what, someone who actually understood the dangers of what we were dealing with. Some of these new guys just don't get it. I'm not saying the Chief wasn't abrasive at times, but he was a true fighter. I trusted him with my life in the short time I knew him. He was a good man."

"Yeah, he was."

There was a pause, followed by Sam sighing at the end of the line,

"I'm sorry to bring up old feelings. I'm sure you're finally making peace with things. I'll let you go."

"I appreciate the call, Sam, I really do" Joyce said, and she hesitated before continuing, "If you ever want someone to talk about it with, I'm around. Call anytime."

"Noted," he said, in a voice that seemed a little lighter to Joyce, "Have a good rest of your day, Joyce."

"You too," she responded, before hanging up the phone. She let out a deep breath and rolled her shoulders, trying to ease the tension from the phone call.

It's not as though she expected anything to come from the investigation. She had plenty of other things to worry about that were taking precedence at the top of her mind. But there was a small part of her that had been hanging onto a shred of hope that something would turn up in the investigation. She didn't even let herself think too specifically about it, she'd had enough false hope in her lifetime, but Sam's news officially closed the door on any lingering doubts over what really happened under that mall. The gate was closed, the Russians escaped, and a man who was very important to her died. And that was that.

Of course Joyce was alone when she went into labor.

It happened on a Tuesday. The kids were at school and she was at home since she'd gone down to part-time at work. She was supposed

to be "resting" but she couldn't stop herself from folding and refolding the baby clothes that were stacked and waiting on her dresser. Damn nesting.

She finished pairing together two tiny socks when a searing pain rippled from her abdomen through her hips to her back. Her back had been bugging her for weeks but she knew this was different. It wasn't her first rodeo after all. She tried to take a deep breath through the pain, but another contraction hit her so hard she doubled over.

"Shit!"

Joyce had to get to the hospital, now. She rubbed a hand over her stomach and quickly grabbed her overnight bag that she packed a week ago. On her way out the door she considered calling Jonathan but another contraction ripped through her and she had to grip the front door frame for support. There was no time. She had to get to the hospital while she could still drive and she'd call the kids from there.

As gingerly as she could, Joyce eased herself into her car and set off. She tried to focus on the road, driving as quickly as possible without being reckless, but the pain was starting to bring tears to her eyes and blur her vision. Her hands were white as she gripped the steering wheel and her breath was coming in shorter and shorter gasps.

"Joyce."

She could see him in the passenger seat out of the corner of her eye but she didn't dare take her eyes off the road.

"You need to stay calm and breath."

"You're not here, *god*, why aren't you here?"

"Listen to me, you're going to be fine, but you can't panic. Stay calm."

"Easy for you to say, you're not in active labor!"

Jim smiled at her, looking at her with the expression he used when he was feeling particularly sentimental.

"Glad to see you haven't lost that fire."

"It's not fair. You should be driving me right now and I should be swearing at you and when we get to the hospital you should be holding my hand. We missed out on that opportunity and I'm angry!"

"I know," he said sadly, "But you're going to get through this and soon it will all be behind you."

"I don't want to do this alone again, I'm not strong enough."

"Stop. Of course you're strong enough. You're going to make it to the hospital, Joyce. You're going to have this baby, and you're going to be happy. You're going to have a good life. You and the kids. Okay?"

She nodded, a stray tear running down her cheek.

"Okay."

Somehow she made it to the hospital in record time. She managed to slide out of the car between contractions and waddle up to the nurses station at the front of the emergency room. The waiting room was busy, but the young man with a mohawk standing in front of her immediately moved aside when he saw her expression. She dropped her bag on the floor and took a deep breath.

"My name is Joyce Byers and I'm in labor."

Eight hours later, it was over.

Joyce lay in her hospital bed, sweaty and exhausted, but entranced by the bundle in her arms. He'd felt massive inside her but now that she was holding him he looked so small and fragile. She brushed her pinky against his tiny cheek, intoxicated by his perfect features and peaceful expression. After letting out a few powerful cries when he was born, her new son had almost instantly fallen back asleep, seemingly unimpressed with this new world.

There was a knock on the door and the nurse peeked her head in,

"Joyce? Your kids are here to see you."

Jonathan, Will and El practically fell over each other trying to enter the room first. They were all smiles as they tentatively approached her bed.

"How are you feeling, Mom?" Jonathan asked.

"Exhausted but happy. Pretty typical." she said, shifting the baby in her arms slightly so his new siblings would have a better view.

"So it's a boy?" Will asked, noting the little blue hat the baby was wearing.

Joyce nodded, "I'm three for three. Come closer and say hi to your brother."

Will approached first and bent down, gently rubbing his finger over the baby's tiny fist. Jonathan also approached, putting a hand on Will's shoulder and smiling. Joyce looked over at El who was still hovering near the end of the bed. The girl was grinning but her eyes were watery.

"What do you think, El?"

"He's cute. What's his name?"

Joyce paused a moment, feeling herself get a little misty.

"David James Hopper"

"Hopper?"

"You and your brother should share a name," Joyce told her, smiling through her tears. El finally approached and placed a delicate hand on the baby's head.

"Hi Davy," El whispered, "I'm your big sister. I'm going to teach you all the important rules, starting with 'don't be stupid'.

Joyce laughed, not caring about the tears that trickled down her cheeks, and soon Jonathan and Will were laughing too. Maybe it was her out of whack hormones, but in this moment Joyce felt like everything was going to be okay. Davy had a family who loved him,

and as long as they were together, they would be okay.

Time passes only when you're not looking.

Somehow a year had gone by. Open wounds were healing into scars, but no one felt like celebrating the Fourth of July. To celebrate would mean to recognize the date itself. It wasn't possible to celebrate a day on which they lost someone so interwoven in their lives. Sometimes it felt like she'd just seen him yesterday.

It was hard to believe it was only a year ago that they fought the battle of Starcourt Mall, as the kids called it. Things were so different now, it felt like a whole other lifetime. Her family lived in a new town. They had new jobs and schools and acquaintances. She had a baby.

Speaking of, she looked down at Davy sleeping peacefully in the crook of her arm as she moved about the kitchen trying to set the table for dinner. It was a tough job to do one handed, but Joyce didn't want to put him down. Davy was objectively a great baby: healthy and easy-going. Joyce couldn't get enough of him and she hated that she was only able to take a month and a half off work before going back full time. Any moment she had at home, she wanted to spend time with him.

He already had her dark hair but his eyes were the same bright blue as his father's. The father he would never know. At first, Joyce was worried that every time she looked at her young son's face, she would see Jim and be overwhelmed by feelings of loss. Instead, she looked at him and felt hope. He was proof that life goes on. A part of Jim will always be here, just like a part of her lives on in Jonathan and Will. She wanted the world for Davy, and he would have it. By God, she would do anything in her power to ensure he never knew the words "demogorgon" or "mind flayer" or "the Upside Down". That was all behind them now.

The sound of the phone ringing woke Davy out of his peaceful slumber and he let out a disgruntled wail. Joyce shushed him, bouncing him gently with one arm and reaching for the phone with the other.

"Hello?"

"Joyce! I've been trying to track you down for weeks! I know you relocated but you should have given me a hint on how to find you!"

"Wha-"

"I have news! It's nothing definite but it's something."

Joyce's stomach dropped. She recognized the voice now, it was Murray. She hadn't spoken to him in a year. She didn't know where he relocated to after his previous hideout was revealed and frankly she didn't care enough to find out. She almost didn't believe he was calling her now, except he was still talking in her ear.

"- my sources are saying they've been taking Americans for years, for their experiments! Interdimensional experiments that is. I only have a vague description of the hostages but I think one might be Jim, it's too much of a coincidence!"

She was frozen. This couldn't be real.

Could it?

"Joyce? Did you hear what I said? Joyce are you there? And..... is that a baby crying?"